RESPITE

Respite care for elderly parents: how to arrange it

Plan a break, win round a reluctant parent and know who to call when you need cover tonight. Who pays, and why the council must not charge you.

By the JNP Sidona team · How we write our guides · 26 November 2026 · 11 min read

To arrange respite care for an elderly parent, ask the council where your parent lives for a needs assessment for them and a carer's assessment for you, decide what kind of break you need, and book it as early as you can, with your parent's agreement. If the council arranges it, any charge for care given to your parent falls on them, not on you. Write a back-up plan now, because emergency respite is far harder to find than planned respite.

KEY POINTS

- Ask the adult social care team in your parent's borough for both assessments. You can ask before you have found a provider, and you can pay privately if you want to move faster.
- Match the break to the problem. A few hours a week, a night's sleep, a fortnight away and a trial stay in a care home are different things, with different providers.
- Start small and frame it as help for you, which it is. If your parent has the mental capacity to decide, the decision is theirs.
- Councils must not charge you for care given to your parent so you can have a break. Your parent may be asked to contribute after a financial assessment.
- For an emergency, the council can act before any assessment. Know your borough's out-of-hours number and keep a written handover by the door.

How do you arrange respite care for an elderly parent?

Respite care, which councils often call replacement care, is someone else taking over your caring for a while so you can rest, work, go to your own appointments or go away. It can happen in your parent's home or away from it. Most people plan it in this order.

1. **Write down what you actually do.** Every task, at what time, and anything only you know: how Dad likes his tea, which tablets are in the blister pack, what upsets Mum at bedtime. This list becomes the handover for whoever covers you.
2. **Decide what the break is for.** Sleep, a regular afternoon off, a holiday, an operation you need, or a trial of more care in the future. The answer decides the type of respite.
3. **Ask the council for two assessments.** A needs assessment (/blog/care-needs-assessment) for your parent and a carer's assessment (/blog/carers-assessment-guide) for you. Ask the council for the borough where your parent lives, which may not be yours. The NHS notes that even if your parent does not want council funding, the needs assessment is still useful because it will say which type of respite suits them best.
4. **Talk to your parent.** See the next section. Do this before you book anything.
5. **Choose and check a provider.** Look up any agency or care home on the Care Quality Commission website, and read its latest report or note that it has not been inspected yet.
6. **Book early and arrange an introduction.** The NHS warns that respite space in a care home can be hard to get at short notice, though some homes take advance bookings. Book early for school holidays and Christmas too. A first meeting before the break, with you there, makes the first day much easier.

Which kind of respite suits your parent?

Types of respite for an older parent and what each is good for

Type	Good for	Things to check
Sitting service or companion visits	A few hours off, regularly, for shopping, appointments or rest	Whether the sitter can help with personal care or only keep company
Visiting carers at home	Covering the routine (getting up, meals, medication, bed) while you are away or ill	Whether overnight cover is needed, and how it will be provided

Type	Good for	Things to check
Live-in care for a short stay	A holiday or an operation, with your parent staying in their own routine	A spare bedroom for the carer, and a proper handover
Day centre	A regular day off, plus company and activity for your parent	Transport, which may cost extra, and whether the centre suits their needs
Short stay in a care home	Longer breaks, higher needs, or a trial before any permanent move	Availability, booking ahead, and how a new place affects someone with dementia

The types come from the NHS's own list, which also includes family and friends stepping in and respite holidays. For a parent who becomes confused by change, staying at home with someone briefed on their routine is usually the least disruptive option.

In London, also ring the carers' service or carers' centre in your parent's borough. The NHS points carers to Carers Trust's local carer services for sitting services (search "carer services near you" on carers.org), and to Carers Trust's information on grants for carers who need a break.

How do you get a parent to agree to respite care?

Expect resistance. Many parents hear "respite" as "they want to put me in a home", or feel they are a burden. Some simply do not want a stranger in the house. The Alzheimer's Society suggests focusing on the benefits a break can bring you both, being clear about the need for support, and talking through which options would and would not be acceptable, so your parent stays in control.

Approaches that tend to help

- **Make it about you.** "I need to have this operation" or "I need one night's proper sleep a week" is honest, and easier for a proud parent to accept than "you need more help".
- **Start small.** A couple of hours while you go to the shops, then a regular afternoon, then a weekend. The Alzheimer's Society also suggests starting with something short.

- **Let them meet the person first.** A cup of tea with the carer, with you there, before you ever leave them alone.
- **Offer real choices.** Home or a short stay away, which days, which tasks, whether the carer cooks. Choices about how, not whether.
- **Ask what worries them.** If the answer is "losing my house" or "being left there", you can deal with that directly. If they still say no, the Alzheimer's Society's advice is to come back to it another time.

Whose decision is it?

If your parent has the mental capacity to decide, it is their decision. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 says a person must be assumed to have capacity unless it is shown otherwise, and that an unwise decision does not by itself mean they lack it. The Care Act also requires their agreement where the council meets your needs by providing care to them.

If your parent has dementia and cannot make this decision, even with help, a decision can be made in their best interests, and the law says you must consider whether something less restrictive would work as well. Involve them as far as you can, and anyone with a lasting power of attorney for health and welfare. Our guide on when a parent with dementia refuses care (/blog/parent-with-dementia-refuses-care) goes through this in detail.

> Waiting until you are exhausted makes all of this harder. In Carers UK's 2024 State of Caring survey, published in February 2025, 65% of the unpaid carers who responded said they felt overwhelmed because they had not been able to take a break. Raise respite while things are calm, not on the day you can no longer cope.

Who pays for respite care for an elderly parent?

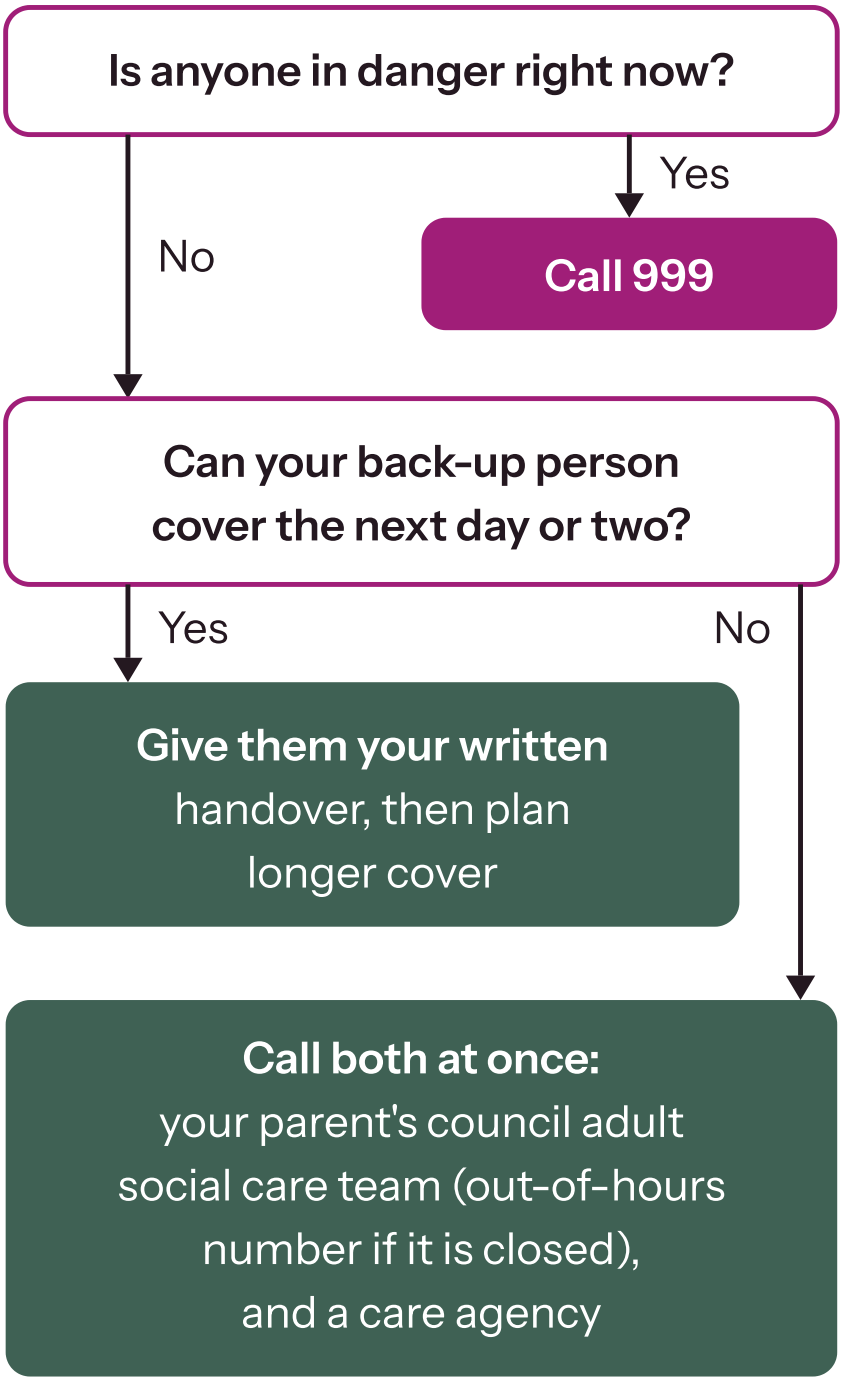
It depends on who arranges the care and on your parent's money, not yours. The government's Care Act guidance says a council must not charge a carer for care given to the person they look after, under any circumstances, so any charge after a financial assessment falls on your parent. If you pay privately, you can book straight away without waiting for an assessment.

A council-funded care home stay can affect your parent's Attendance Allowance, and with it your Carer's Allowance, so check before you book anything longer than a couple of weeks. Our guide to respite care (/blog/respite-care-guide) sets out the funding rules, direct payments, NHS continuing healthcare and what happens to benefits during a break. For the means test and other council routes, see paying for care in London (/paying-for-care-london).

If you are an employee, you can take carer's leave to arrange respite or to cover care yourself: up to one week of unpaid leave in any 12 months, from your first day in the job. GOV.UK (https://www.gov.uk/carers-leave) has the notice rules.

What if you need emergency respite care?

Emergency respite is for when there is no notice: you are admitted to hospital, a family crisis needs you elsewhere, or you simply cannot carry on today. It is the hardest kind to arrange, which is why the back-up plan in the next section matters. If your parent is unwell but not in danger, call their GP, or NHS 111 if the GP is closed.



Emergency cover: deal with danger first, then use your back-up plan, then call the council and an agency in parallel.

Ring the council, even without an assessment

Section 19(3) of the Care Act lets a council meet needs that appear urgent before it has done a needs assessment or a financial assessment. Some councils provide emergency respite, which the Alzheimer's Society says usually lasts between 48 and 72 hours while longer cover is found. What is available differs from borough to borough, so ask.

Find your parent's council's adult social care number and its out-of-hours emergency number now, and put both in your plan. In Lewisham, for example, the adult social care advice line is 020 8314 7777 and the emergency out-of-hours service is 020 8314 6000. Our respite care in Lewisham (/respite-care-lewisham) page has the local carers' services too.

Ring care agencies at the same time

Do not wait for one door to close before trying the next. Have ready your parent's address, needs and medication, who can let a carer in, and how long you expect to need cover.

> If you are the one taken ill, tell the ambulance crew or ward staff straight away that someone at home depends on you. Keep a card in your wallet with your parent's name, address and your back-up person's number.

How to make a back-up plan before you need one

The NHS advises carers to name someone who could step in at short notice, make sure they have keys or the key safe code, and leave written notes about medicines and any dos and don'ts somewhere visible. The Care Act guidance says care plans should set out contingencies for a sudden change or emergency, decided as part of planning, not at the point of crisis. Lewisham Council's carers' assessment, for example, includes emergency planning: what will happen if you suddenly cannot provide care. Ask for the same in your parent's borough.

A good plan fits on two sides of paper:

- Two back-up people, with phone numbers, and who has a key or the key safe code
- Your parent's GP, pharmacy, and any community nurse or social worker
- A current medication list, with times, and where the medicines are kept
- The daily routine: getting up, meals, toilet, bed
- Risks: falls, wandering, swallowing problems, allergies
- What calms them and what upsets them
- Who holds lasting power of attorney, if anyone
- Your parent's council, with daytime and out-of-hours numbers, and the agency you would call

Keep one copy at your parent's home, one with you, and send one to each back-up person. Update it when anything changes.

Questions families ask

Can a respite stay be used as a trial before a care home?

Does respite have to be a holiday?

My parent lives in a different borough. What if a crisis hits while they are staying with me?

How we can help

JNP Sidona is a CQC-registered homecare agency on Lewisham High Street. We provide respite care in London (/respite-care-london) in your parent's own home, from visits for a few hours to a live-in carer while you are away. Visiting care is for Lewisham, nearby south-east London and parts of central and east London, depending on carer availability, and live-in care is available across London. A live-in carer sleeps at night, and we do not currently provide carers who stay awake all night. We can also be the agency on your back-up plan. If you need cover at short notice, ask us: we can sometimes start urgently when we have capacity, and we will tell you honestly if we cannot. If your parent is in danger or seriously unwell, call 999, or NHS 111 for urgent medical advice.

Jackie, our registered manager, offers a free home assessment and meets your parent before anything starts, then writes a care plan and gives you a quote. Respite can be paid privately or through a direct payment. We do not give benefits, funding or legal advice: for that, call the Age UK Advice Line on 0800 678 1602.

Sources

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12. Lewisham Council: When you contact us (adult social care) (https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/socialcare/adult/what-to-expect/when-you-contact-us), checked 26 November 2026
13. Lewisham Council: Help and support for carers (https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/socialcare/adult/support-for-carers/help-and-support-for-carers), checked 26 November 2026
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Talk to Jackie about care at home: ask for a call back (#callback) or call 07446 010486 (tel:+447446010486).

About this guide

Written by the JNP Sidona team using the official sources listed above, which we checked on 26 November 2026. Rules, rates and thresholds change, usually each April, so always confirm the current position with the source or your council. This guide is general information, not medical, legal or financial advice. If you spot something out of

date, email info@jnpsidonasupportservices.co.uk (mailto:info@jnpsidonasupportservices.co.uk) and we will correct it. Read how we write and review our guides (/how-we-write-our-guides).